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ABSTRACT

A recent report, "Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core," was issued by the Albert Shanker Institute of the American Federation of Teachers. This report comparatively analyzes and evaluates the standards for the teaching and learning of civics which state-level departments of education in the United States have developed. This Digest addresses the following: (1) the purposes and rationale for this inquiry about state standards for civic education; (2) the criteria that guided the inquiry; (3) the findings of the inquiry; and (4) suggestions for improving civic education. (Contains 12 references.) (BT)

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State Standards for Civic Education

By John J. Patrick

A significant new report, *Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core*, has been issued by the Albert Shanker Institute of the American Federation of Teachers. This document comparatively analyzes and evaluates the standards for the teaching and learning of civics which state-level departments of education in the United States have developed. This Digest addresses (1) the purposes and rationale for this inquiry about state standards for civic education, (2) the criteria that guided the inquiry, (3) the findings of the inquiry, and (4) suggestions for improving civic education.

Purposes and Rationale. Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia have developed standards for civic education (Iowa and Rhode Island do not have statewide standards). These standards represent priorities in teaching and learning. They indicate what each state department of education wants students to know and be able to do in civics. Are these state standards likely to enhance the civic education of students? The purpose of the state-by-state analysis of standards in civic education was to answer this question.

The main reason for undertaking this comparative study of state standards is the fundamental importance of civic education in a constitutional democratic republic, such as the United States of America. From the founding of the republic until today, a primary purpose of education in schools has been to teach knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed by citizens to maintain and improve government of, by, and for the people. Do the state standards seem likely to contribute positively to education for competent citizenship in a democracy? If not, how can they be improved?

Criteria for Evaluating Standards. This inquiry about the quality of state standards was conducted systematically in terms of five criteria.

The first criterion refers to a common core of learning anchored in the content of U.S. history, world history, civics/government, and economics, which is necessary for the achievement of competent citizenship in a constitutional democracy. The key question is, "Are the essentials of a civic core specified clearly?"

The second criterion is about the practical implementation of the core content. The key question is, "Are the required topics teachable in flexible and imaginative ways across the secondary grades, including a selected number in depth, within the limits of time that teachers actually have?"

The third criterion pertains to the coherence and connectedness of the core content within and across grades or levels of schooling. The key question is, "Do the standards mandate or suggest an orderly sequence of courses that articulate the essential content across the grades, avoiding needless repetition but also making time for review of vital learning from earlier grades?"

The fourth criterion concerns the inclusiveness of the civic education specified in the standards, which requires all students to achieve them. The key question is, "Are the courses that carry the essential content of civic/political education actually required of all students regardless of school 'track'?"

The fifth criterion is about links between different subjects in the core curriculum, such as history, civics/government, geography, and economics. This criterion points to the pitfall of teaching subjects or strands of content in isolation. And it emphasizes the importance of historical context in civic education. The key question is, "Are the vital ideas, insights, and topics of civics, economics, and geography presented, whenever appropriate, in the context of the historical narrative of people in real times and places?"

Key Findings. The report lauds the state-level education departments for their attempts to develop content standards that students should achieve in history, civics/government, and other subjects related to education for citizenship in a democracy. The report is very critical, however, of the standards developed by most of the states. In general, the report commends less than one-third of the states for the overall quality of their standards.

In regard to the important first criterion, only 13 states have standards that "carry all or nearly all critical topics, mostly in clear English and presented as essential to be touched upon, not merely as examples or suggestions." (Gagnon 2003, 23). States with commendable standards are Alabama, Arizona, California, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, and Virginia. Other states' standards are more or less "content-light" in their treatment of history, civics/government, and other core subjects.

Not even one state, however, satisfies the second criterion, which pertains to the teachability of the standards within the time available to teachers. Not even the best state standards, deemed so based on the first criterion, meet this second criterion. The report equally criticizes two types of standards as deficient: standards overstuffed with details and those that are sweepingly vague and vacuous. Neither type of standard is "teachable in any but hurried, superficial ways in the time available" (Gagnon 2003, 25).

Only 14 states fully meet the third criterion, which is about specifications of a systematic scope and sequence. And the states generally have performed unevenly in regard to the fourth criterion, about common requirements. Finally, the important fifth criterion, about coherence and connections across topics and subjects, is met fully by only eight states (Alabama, California, Indiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nebraska, New York, and Texas).

According to the report, the state standards based on the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) model "are the weakest on specifics and tend not to offer a common core of learning." Contrary to the social studies announced aim—competent citizenship—they have very little political history and are weak . . . on the political, economic, social, and cultural ideas of all world civilizations, including Western" (Gagnon 2003, 23).

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The report also criticizes the NCSS standards for social studies (Schneider 1994) for their "sweeping topics" and "vague, imprecise understandings" that are "contrary to preparing citizens of sound judgment" (Gagnon 2003, 24).

Key Recommendations. Based on comparative analysis and appraisal of the state standards, the report of the Albert Shanker Institute makes four key recommendations for improving civic education for democracy in the United States:

1. All state standards should be revised to comply with the five criteria that guided the comparative analysis and evaluations. If so, there would be recognition in all the states of the teachable content, organized coherently and connectedly, that constitutes a common core of civic learning to prepare students for competent citizenship in a democracy.

2. The state education departments should involve master teachers and scholars in the ongoing revision and improvement of the state standards.

3. The states should require renewal and reform of teacher preparation programs to provide prospective teachers with "deep knowledge of content and effective teaching methods" (Gagnon 2003, 30).

4. States should encourage provision of content-rich programs of professional development for employed teachers.

Web Sites and Resources for Civic Education. You can find information about the Albert Shanker Institute of the American Federation of Teachers and about education for democracy in the United States and abroad at this World Wide Web site: <http://www.ashankerinst.org>.

Information about content state standards for core subjects such as history, civics, geography, mathematics, and so forth can be found at the World Wide Web site of the American Federation of Teachers: <http://www.aft.org/edissues/standards/Index.htm>.

Copies of the report on state standards in civic education, EDUCATING DEMOCRACY: STATE STANDARDS TO ENSURE A CIVIC CORE, can be obtained from: Albert Shanker Institute; 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW; Washington, D.C. 2001. The price of a single copy is $15 ($10 each for orders of five or more).

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche, paper, or electronic full text from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; World Wide Web <edrs.com>; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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